

our theorists had hoped. Thoughtless or misplaced volunteering can do serious damage, to volunteers, the recipients of their aid, and to the society at large, for reasons to be dissected in later pages.

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Volunteering and Political Activism

Both “volunteering” and “political activism” are called “civic engagement,” but they are not the same thing. Volunteering and activism blend and separate in many ways. Sometimes, as in Jane Addams’ case, volunteering blooms into activism. Sometimes, they are disconnected from one another. As the previous chapter started to show, many practitioners and theorists argue that pretending there is a neutral realm for “volunteering” that can be entirely separate from “politics” is a mistake. This chapter further explores the boundaries of “political activism,” showing that there are varied routes to activism, including the one Addams took, which started with innocent-seeming “volunteering.”

Usually, though, when we think of volunteering and political activism, we imagine two very different creatures. When I have asked my students to “free associate,” by writing down words that come to mind when they think of “volunteer,” their words are overwhelmingly warm and friendly: “helpful, caring, fun, selfless, kind-hearted, charity, devote, free, and unity” . . . as well as “looks good on a resume.” Words they associated with “activist” are less uniformly positive: “anger, protest, bias, argue, corruption, unhappy, mobs, shouting, hippies, riot,” as well as “transform,” “awareness,” “independence,” “freedom,” and “challenge.” In our shared imagination, the volunteer feels comfortably warm, while the activist either feels too coolly intellectual or too hot-headed. In our collective imagination, the nice, agreeable volunteer reads to pre-schoolers, while the activist pickets and shouts.

In reality, the difference is not so stark. In general, yes, volunteers work on fixing problems, in a hands-on, direct way. Yes, activists usually try to change laws, by writing letters to legislators, holding demonstrations and sit-ins – to gain enough power to get a minimum wage established, for example, or workplace safety laws written, environmental protection enforced, bike paths built, faraway political prisoners released, or rainforests preserved. Or activists work more subtly, to transform entrenched customs, even when challenging these entrenched customs evokes great terror in some people – about interracial dating and sexism in the mid twentieth century, or gay marriage today, for example.

However, issues often move from being considered non-politics to politics and vice versa. How does this happen? What difference does it make for a civic association's activities and the meaning of them, if members treat their work as "political" or not?

How Activism Differs from Volunteering

By providing cloth diapers instead of disposable ones, Snuggiebumms Diaper Service advertises that it is "changing the world, one diaper at a time." Other companies and nonprofits tell us that we can change the world "one light bulb at a time" (from several companies that sell energy efficient light bulbs), "one smile at a time" (from Operation Smile, an organization that raises funds to help children who are born with a cleft palate and whose parents cannot afford surgery), "one sequin at a time" (Lady Gaga), "one room at a time" (in a book about "green remodeling"), and of course, one person at a time. Usually, volunteers do not routinely question the roots of the problems they aim to solve, but just try to get in there, hands on, directly, to solve the problem, not necessarily caring about its source.

In contrast, political activists

- *Treat the problems that they aim to fix as issues of justice, and of human decision-making, and therefore, as conflicts, rather than as simply natural, eternal, and inevitable.*

- *Expand the domain of political, conscious, democratic decision-making, moving issues from "private territory" to "public," demanding that people reflect on the issue. Any issue is potentially eligible: how we raise our children, teach good manners, define racial categories, reward hard work, use natural resources, produce food, eat, consume, marry, give birth, die – how we survive and how we define thriving.*
- *"Connect the dots," raise the issue to a level of generality, to see how one issue is connected to another, till the activists have a picture of the whole society.*
- *Often operate outside of routine channels, with civil disobedience or other action that disrupts the taken-for-granted normalcy of the society – sit-ins and boycotts, for example.*

(This list summarizes the definition of political activism in Della Porta et al. 2006; also Hamidi 2006.)

Let's treat these elements one at a time.

Treating a Problem as if it is a Result of Human Decision-Making, and Expanding the Realm of Politics

When civic associations make it clear that a problem is not natural and inevitable, but has a human solution, their first step has to be to name the problem. Some examples from the mid twentieth century of newly named problems include "urban blight," "silent spring (for a spring that had so much pollution, many birds didn't sing, but died instead)" "child abuse," and "the problem that has no name" (what early feminist Betty Friedan called the vague unease that housewives felt). In the 1970s and 1980s came "marital rape," and "environmental racism." "Marital rape" was invented because, before the 1980s, in most states, a husband could force his wife to have sex against her will and it was not considered "rape," but just unpleasant. Environmental racism refers to our society's disproportionate frequency of locating toxic dumps and industries in disadvantaged, minority neighborhoods

(Bullard 2000). Naming a problem, in turn, allows for further action on it.

When the phrase "environmental racism" arose in the 1980s, the phrase itself unified problems that had previously been seen as separate: the toxic dump in an African-American neighborhood, the uranium storage unit next door to the Native-American reservation, and the chemical refinery in the Latino neighborhood. With the new name, they all become "see-able" as cases of the newly named category. Naming a problem is crucial, then. Once people name a problem as "politics," and not just natural and inevitable, they can "see" many things that once seemed separate as fitting into this new category.

The most spectacular examples of the past three decades involve issues surrounding gender, family, sexuality, and mental health. There was no name for "child abuse" or "neglect" before the middle of the twentieth century! Plenty of children underwent what we would *now* call abuse or neglect before that, but there was no law forbidding it, and no legal definition of it (Nelson 1986). There was no phrase "child abuse" in colloquial speech. It was just considered an unfortunate occurrence. This made it hard for people to see a wide range of acts as "cases of" child abuse: one child had sex with a grandparent, another was locked in a closet, another was beaten, but these problems were not seen as related, not "on the same table" (Foucault 1989). Sometimes, the new category is a result of professionals, such as mental-health clinicians, becoming activists of sorts, as in the case of "child abuse" or "post-traumatic stress disorder." However the new category originated, it allows people to "see" separate items as sharing a key characteristic, and simultaneously, they can start to talk about it. They can discover other people who share the problem, and they can do something together about this newly named category. In the process of talking about it, they can start to see if it is a problem that is inevitable and natural – not amenable to a political solution – or if there might be an issue of justice and politics involved.

Of course, naming a social problem is not like naming a cat. Whatever one names one's cat is its name. In contrast, not

everyone will agree that "environmental racism" exists, even after someone has invented the name. With marital rape, for example, there is an argument, not over whether husbands sometimes force wives to have sex at gunpoint or knifepoint during marriage, but whether it is a logical possibility for that activity to be "rape" in the first place. A Right-wing icon and activist, Phyllis Schlafly, disputed the logical possibility of marital rape, saying, "By getting married, the woman has consented to sex, and I don't think you can call it rape." This was part of a speech she gave in 2007, not in prehistoric times, for her hosts, the Bates College Republicans (Leonard 2007). Legislators over the years have used the same reasoning to deny the logical possibility of rape in marriage. When activists try to name a problem, other activists and policy-makers will disagree that such a thing exists, only certain names will stick, and not just any name will suffice. Some will argue over the data, saying that a particular man did not rape his wife in a particular case, while others will take it to a political level, arguing over the conceptual possibility of the category's existence at all.

Over the past few decades, civic associations have started to address many problems that once seemed purely personal and private. The definitions of politics keep expanding. Consider this list that Robert Dahl, a preeminent mid-century political scientist, composed, in 1961, of topics that were obviously *not* politics: "food, sex, love, family, work, play, shelter, comfort, friendship, social esteem, and the like" (cited in Schudson 1997: 240). All of these topics have come under political scrutiny since Dahl's time. We could add to this list of formerly un-political topics: Art becomes a political question when there are revivals of ethnic styles, battles over sexual images in museums, or arguments over what to count as "art" versus what to count as "folkloric crafts" (and therefore, not worth millions of dollars and not worth archiving in museums). Birth and death become political questions when people argue about natural childbirth, or assisted suicide. Ethnic and religious identity becomes a political question when people argue about bilingual education or headscarves. Medicine becomes politics when people argue about AIDS research, health care funding, and genetic testing. This is just a very shortened list

of some obvious candidates for topics that have gone from "not-politics" to "politics" since Dahl's time. How do people decide to treat some shared problems as worthy of political solutions? It is *not* that some problems are *intrinsically* political and others are not. It is almost impossible to think of a personal, or local problem that is just completely unconnected to the broader society. Almost *everything* is *potentially* "politics."

Take the problem of physical or developmental disability. Disability was once considered a simply natural, biological problem. Before 1975, if you or your child had a disability, it was just your problem. If you could not enter the public school's door in your wheelchair, or could not stay in the public school because you had a learning disability, the school sent you home or sent you to a school that threw all disabled people together, no matter what their particular disability was. Usually, it was then your parents' (usually mother's) responsibility to provide you with an education that matched your abilities.

A great transformation started with little civic associations of disabled people and their relatives, organized initially for mutual aid in the form of emotional support, care-giving exchange, and information exchange. By the 1960s, partly taking their inspiration from the Civil Rights Movement, some people were trying to make disability into a political issue (Pettinicchio 2011). Disability goes from being a problem that seems natural and inevitable to one that we, the people, have a duty to ameliorate. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1973 is a culmination of years of quiet pressure. It states that all children have a *right* to an education. The right expanded to include access to any buildings that receive state funding, such as courts, medical offices that use public money (such as Medicare), public libraries, public pools, and more. So, we now have sidewalk ramps for wheelchairs, "kneeling busses" that have a ramp that unfolds from the bus to the sidewalk, so that people in wheelchairs, old people and anyone else who can't climb stairs can still enter the bus, and more. We as a society have decided to pay for this, and when people are on the bus and the driver lowers the ramp for a person in a wheelchair, the other passengers almost all, almost always, politely wait. We

pay, and we wait, because we have decided, implicitly, that a good society is one in which people do not just leave the disabled to suffer on their own, or to rely on the kindness of relatives (Kittay 2000).

Step-by-step, these associations had "politicized" the issue, in small ways at first, until finally, it reached the level of a change in the nation's laws. In the grander scheme of human history, this was a massive and incredibly rapid transformation. Before the 1960s, disability was considered a misfortune, an act of God or nature. The wheel of fate had turned and you were on the bottom. After the 1960s, people started treating the issue as one of rights, not just fate; as injustice, not just bad luck; as a problem that people can and should fix rather than leave up to God or nature (Pitkin 1980). Here, as in Tocqueville's model, people joined in civic action with the aim of swaying "moral luck," by forcing a change in *conditions*. It is hard to be an equal member of society if you are at the bottom and cannot go to school, or the library, or mount city hall's steps. It is also, perhaps surprisingly, equally hard to be a fair-minded person if you are at the top, and cannot hear the ideas of the people who sit excluded at the bottom of the staircase. Whether at the top or bottom, making access easier makes eudaimonia easier for everyone to experience.

The example of disability rights shows a way that activities that start off as "natural" comes to be seen as "subject to human decision-making," and how something that starts off as "non-political" comes to be seen as "political." It became clear to the disability rights advocates that just carrying each disabled person up the steps, one at a time, was too hard, and humiliating to the person who was being carried. The problem was the conditions, not the individual. The advocates became political activists.

Connecting the Dots

"Connecting the dots" is a shorthand way of talking about the second element that distinguishes activism from typical volunteer work. Fixing a problem like marital rape, or legal segregation, or

pollution might seem far removed from the overarching, radical changes that something like Goldman's image of workers' self-management suggests. But history shows that once people start challenging one simple-seeming law or custom – start to pull just one thread out of the social fabric – the whole cloth seems to unravel for them, like a knitted scarf that started the day with only one loose piece of yarn and ends the day completely undone.

A good illustration of this unraveling process comes from the stories of the American college students who went to the South in the 1960s to register black people to vote. The lives of these students resembled Jane Addams' in many ways: mainly from upper-middle class backgrounds, these hopeful youth wanted to do something useful for society. When they first signed up, most of them assumed that the problem would be relatively easy to solve: just ride on down to the South and sign up more black voters. When these Freedom Riders, as they were called, got there, they discovered the local police were white and were usually on the side of the racists, either through personal conviction, political ties, blood ties, or all three. The higher-up, non-local legislators in the South were no help, either. Powerful Southerners often worked hand-in-hand with powerful Northerners, too. Like Addams, these hopeful students realized that if they wanted to fix the problem, they would have to change much more than the voter registration process (all of this is recounted in McAdam 1990). Jane Addams started with helping families one at a time, and ending up pressing for new laws about child labor; the Northern college students were similarly starting to see the whole scarf unravel.

Non-routine action and playful politics

Often, though not always, political activism differs from volunteering in a third way: by working outside the normal channels for registering complaints – not by sending petitions and letters to legislators, but by more direct means. Protestors from Gandhi to Martin Luther King to contemporary Occupy activists have often *started* by trying to work within the normal rules, but then have concluded that working within the rules does not always work.

When Civil Rights Movement activists began to stage sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, and to sit at the front of the bus in segregated busses, they knew they would get arrested, but saw this “civil disobedience” as a step toward the greater good. Writing from a Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King said,

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” (King 1963)

It might seem as if civil disobedience is mainly aimed at simply getting the lunch, resting the tired feet on the bus, making the injustice go away. But more importantly, activists commit civil disobedience to draw attention to their cause. Activists notice that if no one gets beaten up, their demonstrations do not make it into the news (Della Porta et al. 2006). So, they stage pickets, demonstrations, and commit acts of civil disobedience, in hopes of getting media attention.

In the past twenty years, however, pickets, demonstrations, and even civil disobedience have become routine. While there still are, rarely, some completely spontaneous, unplanned political events, and some activists who smash windows and light bonfires, most activists plan most political events in advance. To stage a demonstration, protesters usually get a “parade permit” from the police. When the activists plan on going further, to conduct civil disobedience, there are usually no surprises there, either: Protesters usually tell the police precisely what they are planning, so that they can get arrested without becoming permanently disabled by out-of-control, panicked police. The protesters go through a “training” in how to commit civil disobedience without becoming injured. For example, they learn to hold their hands apart and not to make abrupt gestures so as not to appear threatening to police and so as not to be seen as “resisting arrest;” they learn not to wear contact lenses in case the police use tear gas; to make sure they have a

buddy who will know their whereabouts when they get arrested; to turn to the side and relax if police charge toward them; not to have weapons or drugs on them; and more.

This *routinely* non-routine action makes for an interesting relationship between protesters and police. While the police normally defend the status quo against the protesters, they also sometimes have to defend the protesters against counter-protesters. This happened, for example, when anti-immigration activists came to harass the large immigrant rights marches of 2007. It happens when the Los Angeles police follow Critical Mass bike rides as the hundreds of bike riders take over entire streets so that cars cannot pass. The police are supposed to keep the bikes in order but also to protect the bike riders from the cars.

Sometimes, protesters try to convince the police to switch sides. Anti-nuclear war activists in the 1980s held workshops on how to talk to the police in a persuasive, non-antagonistic way, with the aim of showing them that the police themselves stood to lose from nuclear build-up, too. Later, Occupy activists tried to convince police in many locales that the police were part of the "99 percent," too. Sometimes, this strategy worked spectacularly well. In Albany, NY, for example, the police defied the government, by publically announcing that they would refuse to arrest Occupy protesters unless they were seriously damaging state property (Rudolf 2012). And over the course of history, change has sometimes, indeed, included the police and armed forces' switching sides, going from defending the government to joining the protesters against the government in power.

When formerly "non-routine" actions like sitting in and boycotting become routine, some activists go further afield, looking for new ways to break routine so they can bring attention to their cause. The gay rights group Act Up, for example, staged "kiss-ins" at ice-cream parlors in the 1980s. Another example of activists' creative quest to find non-routine ways to get their message out comes from arguments over how to teach evolution in public schools. The Kansas City School Board voted to force teachers to teach evolution as if it were just a theory, alongside the Bible's theory of Creation, in biology classes. In protest, the Church of

the Flying Spaghetti Monster formed, to press the School Board to make sure that all pupils *also* learn about *their* religion's views of creation. Is the Flying Spaghetti Monster part of a religion deserving the same respect the creationists' story gets? The church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster's website says it is, arguing that, "Most of us do not believe (that) a religion . . . requires literal belief in order to provide spiritual enlightenment . . . many in other religions don't literally believe their scripture . . . (3/3/2012, from <http://www.venganza.org/about/>)"

And all of this stands in contrast to the main comparison group for this chapter: volunteers, who never have to worry about Flying Spaghetti Monsters, or the effect of tear gas on contact lenses.

Puzzles for Activist and Volunteer Groups

For all of their differences, activists and volunteers face some similar puzzles.

Expanding the scope of decision-making, the first element of activism, comes with potential problems. When activism starts to turn routine habits and customs – be they smoking, flirting with one's colleague, or raping one's wife – into public, political decisions, it can be hard to know where to stop, and it can lead to a trampling of privacy.

As Tocqueville argued, democracies allow the people as a whole to decide where to place the line dividing private life from public life. In democracies, Tocqueville argued, people use public powers to ensure and protect privacy. Contemporary examples include making sure that you are allowed to practice whatever religion you want and are not thrown out of school for speaking your mind. These seem utterly reasonable, but politicizing seemingly private decisions could go too far. Many utopian novels of the late 1800s to early 1900s envisioned a society that unified work, family, and everything else into a monstrosity that the authors imagined would be a total political solution to everything! In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's late nineteenth-century science fiction utopia, *Herland*, for example, the whole collective raised babies, so babies

would not become attached just to one or two parents, and so that parents would not selfishly care more about their own child than any other. This kind of arrangement is not impossible: a similar family system worked in Samoa for thousands of years before the Europeans came (Mead 1971 [1928]), and the socialist kibbutzim in twentieth-century Israel had such a structure, as well. However, when squatters (people who take over empty, boarded-up apartments, and don't pay rent) in Geneva share cooking, cleaning, and all of their living space, it can feel too intrusive and overwhelming – “unbearable” (Breviglieri 1999). While such arrangements for living, working, and childraising are certainly possible, a civic organization may well ask whether they are desirable.

The question that people in civic associations can decide, that is, is how to draw the line between public and private. Answering it is more complicated than it seems. In the most contemporary societies, we think we treat love and sex as “private,” but we make many fine exceptions: between teacher and student; between doctor and patient; between family members; between humans and sheep; between people under eighteen years old and people over eighteen; between races until 1967 in some states in the USA (many states had laws against interracial marriage till then); between people of the same sex. In all of those cases, we think of ourselves as treating love as a private affair that activists are “politicizing,” but in fact, our society already does politicize sex, love, and family, making them into public, legal questions that laws already judge. It might seem tempting to say that all such decisions should be private, till a child dies of abuse or neglect. Seemingly intrusive public regulation seems less intrusive after a disaster. Usually, ordinary people do not discuss this fine line-drawing very clearly, but theorists argue that they should. The job should, according to some theorists, be one for civic associations to decide (Habermas 1985)

Drawing the boundary is even more puzzling in a multicultural society than it might be in a more homogenous one. How do we decide, for example, what to count as abuse, when different cultures disagree? In France, part of the argument against wearing a burka – the long robe, hood, and face covering that certain

Muslims demand for women – is a form of abuse, preventing women from enjoying full-body movement and access to sunlight. But forbidding it in schools and public meetings seems like a violation of the society's vision of religion as one's own private business, not publicly regulated.

Another dilemma with “expanding the scope of decision-making” is that it would probably be impossible for workers to hold a public, thoughtful discussion about all aspects of production, about the cost of bamboo versus wood, molybdenum versus titanium, for example. For this, it seems to make sense to use the market, and money, as a way of making decisions; the market could be an efficient mechanism for assigning value that did not require a long discussion. We will come back to this in later chapters, especially where we discuss Corporate Social Responsibility.

Problems with “connecting the dots” *

When activists start to see how pulling out one stitch might set the whole scarf unraveling, this can also pose dilemmas. It is hard to sustain the life-changing commitment of people like the Freedom Riders. They went South and came back unable to fit into their former lives. The transformation was painful at the moment, and even twenty years later, their divorce rates were still higher and incomes lower than their counterparts who had wanted to but, through happenstance, not been able to go on the trip South in the 1960s (McAdam 1990). This kind of painful transformation makes little, once-a-week, “pick up litter in the park” type volunteering look appetizingly harmless. It makes activism look potentially too difficult and risky for ordinary people. And perhaps it is better to have a lot of people who are a little committed to their social missions than to have only a few people who are a lot committed. The “strength of weak ties” can be as strong as the thousands of thin cables that hold up the Golden Gate Bridge.

Another risk that comes with seeing the big picture is that people might get discouraged when they see how the little problem they aim to fix is connected to big problems. They might feel powerless and just go home. For example, participants in volunteer groups

often shy away from talking about anything beyond the very “do-able” tasks at hand. In *Avoiding Politics* (Eliasoph 1998), we encounter parent volunteers who know about the political roots of local problems that affect their children, such as the lack of state funds for repairing the school building, even when the library ceiling caves in, or the race riots at the school, or the 30-acre toxic pit at a military base a mile away. They know about the political connections. While raising funds for their children’s high school, for example, parents in a typical parent association conducted a long discussion about how to sell steamed hot dogs at track meets. One member said,

I looked all over for a machine that can roast hot dogs continuously so we don’t get a backlog when all the kids come up to the stand at once. So, I found one at this restaurant supplier. They’re offering us a discount, so we should write them a thank you note. It’s called a Royal Dog Steamer, and it can steam foot longs, Polish dogs, hot links, regular dogs, sausages, you name it, about twenty at a time! (Eliasoph 1998)

Outside of meetings, behind the scenes, “backstage,” participants talk about these “bigger” issues. These volunteers are not doing what Tocqueville would have predicted; they are not learning how to connect their seemingly personal affairs with big political issues. To keep having faith in their own volunteer efforts, they need to uphold a can-do spirit. In their minds, this means not talking about discouraging problems that they can’t immediately fix. *They assume that it would be too discouraging to talk about politics, even while they are steaming the hot dogs.*

In theory, if we think of Addams, we imagine that grassroots volunteering and politics are on a continuum, bleeding into one another. Here, paradoxically, volunteering makes political action more difficult. These volunteers were worried that their fragile can-do spirit would collapse if they talked about the bigger issues surrounding their kids’ high school. Talking about bigger issues would be “inappropriate” and “out of place” in their civic associations.

Working outside of routine channels also poses puzzles for civic

associations, beyond the obvious problem of being risky. The dramatic methods that activists used to call attention to an issue might drive the public away from it. The sit-in, the outdoors encampment, the mass arrest in the capitol building: all of this can start to take attention away from the movement’s goals. It becomes especially difficult to keep the movement’s “eyes on the prize,” because if police attack protesters, the protesters then devote their time to seeking medical and legal aid, instead of publicizing the issues they had originally aimed to publicize. Several short newspaper reports in November and December 2011 in the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, reported that police beat protesters at Occupy Oakland, without once mentioning why Occupy Oakland existed.

Efforts to Separate Volunteers from Politics

However hard it is to connect volunteering to politics, disconnecting them might be more risky. One political scientist has gained international acclaim by arguing that civic associations “make democracy work” even when they are completely disconnected from politics. Any kind of togetherness works to build democracy, Robert Putnam (2000) says, even the kind that develops in informal associations like bowling leagues and singing groups. His evidence is that the mid twentieth century was both the high point of civic engagement and the high point for political engagement, as indicated by high voting rates, numbers of times people contacted politicians, and other measures. This is a false correlation in numerous ways.

Critics of Putnam say that his work has gotten wide play because he offers a nice feel-good argument, which suffers not only from the flaw of being incorrect (Skocpol 2003), but also for leading to destructive policies that value “volunteering” at the expense of “politics.” First of all, Putnam counted many political activist groups (such as the Sierra Club) as “civic” associations that he said caused “political” engagement, so he was saying, in effect, that political activism caused political activism (Sobieraj and White 2004; Skocpol 2003). Furthermore, the years he points

to as the high water mark for American civic life were also the years in which the gap between rich and poor was at an all-time low, and he did not fully grasp the connection between the two trends, according to critics. This trend was partly the federal government's response to many civic associations' fight for policies to promote equality. The equality for which the civic associations fought promoted, in turn, more civic engagement; in a society that has a relatively small gap between rich and poor, civic associations thrive. Putnam's critics argue, for example, that the state lessened inequality when it responded to civic associations' demands for health benefits for veterans, or for Social Security, for example, in the late 1800s and early 1900s. These programs benefited all veterans and all old people (Skocpol 2003: 71), not just those who fell below some poverty line. Associations helped enforce the policies that led to relative class equality which, in turn, allowed strong associations to grow and thrive. In these ways, a strong state with strong welfare programs did not crowd out civic life, despite some Right-wing pundits' claims to the contrary. To the contrary, a strong state that promoted a somewhat egalitarian society went *with* a strong civic life that was embroiled with the political affairs of the day. Another place to see this mutual embroilment is in the local chapters' internal affairs. Women in the Henry, Nebraska chapter of a statewide association gathered in 1916 to discuss "South Dakota Laws of Interest to Women and Children," "Our National Defenses Today," and "Immigration," for example (Skocpol 2003: 122). So, rather than imagining a wall between civic associations and the state, we should imagine a cycle between the two.

Putnam's critics also demonstrate that the civic associations that pressed for these egalitarian policy changes were big, powerful, national associations, not little, local groups. These national federations were organized into locals, the way the Boy Scouts is. These were the associations whose placards used to be attached to the sign announcing a city limits like the Lions Club, Rotary, Elks, and Moose. Big civic clubs were scorned by intellectuals of the era, in novels such as Sinclair Lewis' popular mid-century novels *Babbitt*, *Main Street*, and *Arrowsmith*, which depicted them as

gathering places for dull, smug, drunk businessmen. They may have been that, but part of what made those associations popular was also the excitement of feeling that one was "part of something bigger." It was not little local bowling leagues and singing groups that made democracy work, but the nationally "federated" associations whose members saw themselves as important political actors that did. We will come back to this question of whether state and civic associations work in see-saw relation to one another in chapter 3.

It's Not Always an "Either-Or" Between "Volunteer" and "Politics" ✨

Volunteers often want the hands-on task of helping someone directly, but volunteering sometimes becomes more convincing, and therefore, more inspiring when it is connected to politics. When you are helping the one child learn math, it is hard to ignore the thirty-four others in the room who are not getting any one-on-one help. You might start to wonder if hiring a few more staff people in the school would be effective. You might feel stupid volunteering to spend hundreds of hours helping one homeless person instead of spending that same amount of time trying to get the government or a corporation to fund housing for a thousand homeless people. But then, you might realize that to get more staff at the school or to get housing for thousands of homeless people, you would have to organize an activist group, and so, if you are a typical American volunteer, your mind might shut off at that moment that the possibility arose in your head. You might end up feeling powerless.

Political activism, on the other hand, also has its limitations. Activism lets people see the big picture, but it can feel abstract and dry. The results are long term and mediated, not yet tangible. Sometimes, it seems to be all about writing letters, signing petitions, making convincing arguments and staging public events. Activism can sometimes become more emotionally real to people when it is connected to volunteering. Sometimes, a person can

learn something from directly helping someone, even if it is something that the volunteer cannot later put into words (Bender 2003). Sometimes, people cannot get this feeling by writing, picketing, or reading – except maybe by reading novels and poetry. Ideally, one would want both: to unify “caring about” an issue with “taking care of” someone or something (Tronto 1994).

Take the problem of traffic congestion in cities like Los Angeles, Madrid, Bogotá, Paris, and Mexico City. People want to fix the problem right away by taking over the streets with masses of bikes. They want a tangible experience of traveling in different conditions right away. They also want to change policies, so that the experience will be easier to have in the future. These cities are not known for their peaceful, green streets; riding a bike in them is a death-defying feat at the moment. Bike activists have extracted promises from many cities to construct networks of bike paths, allowing people to commute on their own steam instead of fossil fuels. This is an important policy change for which political activists can advocate, but if nothing changed but the pavement and the regulations, it would not be enough. Bicycle activists in these and dozens of other cities around the world have been taking over streets for a day at a time, colonizing space that is usually filled with cars and trucks, and using it for bikes, skateboards, roller skates, anything but gas-powered vehicles. All of these are aimed at showing people that the streets can become recreational spaces for pleasant exercise, fresh air, and sociability. The activists, that is, have to lure people into *wanting* to ride bikes on city streets. Activists in different societies balance the private versus the public justifications for their activism, as an ongoing study of bike activism worldwide shows (Luhtakallio, Carrel, and Eliasoph 2011).

The original event that took over the city streets for a day was in Bogotá. Its original aim was to reduce crime by getting people out on the street and acquainted with neighbors. Now, activists all over have copied it, but as it travels the world, it takes different forms. In Los Angeles, they marvel over the streets’ quietness when the cars are gone; in Helsinki, they take pride in fighting global climate change while slogging through the rain; in Paris, they mount their “vélos” (the word for bike in French) fiercely

claiming to be starting a “vélorution;” and meanwhile, in Madrid, there is “ciclondista!”

If people just focused on attaining their policy goals, they would miss the process. When people connect the means and the ends, they learn new things along the way. The process opens up new feelings, thoughts, actions, and discoveries. In the process of volunteering to enact the change that they hope to institutionalize, people discover pleasures and horrors that they had not anticipated – the quiet sound of a city street without cars, a view of a trash problem that no one had publicized, the wind in their hair, a chance encounter that becomes a budding romance, a vision of childhood in slums with no green places for play. None of this would have happened if they had passed each scene in a car. In Los Angeles, they discover that it is faster to bike from point A to B when there is no car traffic than it is to drive the same distance in the usual amount of car traffic. This is a discovery with *major implications* for urban design. As we saw in Jane Addams’ work, hands-on, non-conflictual, volunteer-style engagement yields valuable insights for policy-makers.

¶ A similar mix of hands-on and abstract involvement surrounds questions about food. Problems related to food include poor nutrition even in wealthy countries, rising obesity rates, a loss of knowledge of customary farming techniques and the environmental destruction that goes with that, as well as a simple lack of food. A gratifyingly hands-on, volunteer-style way of addressing all of these is to start community gardens. It is educational to watch the food grow, people come together socially, and the result tastes better than the grocery store equivalent. When a community garden works, it is a tangible experience that leads to discoveries about the local society that participants could not have guessed by just reading about the neighborhood. But it is not enough, because at best, they do not raise enough food for more than a few dinners for a few families. So, beyond starting community gardens, neighborhoods can lure farmers’ markets into the area. But that is not enough, either, since many people never learned how to cook fresh vegetables. So, beyond this, volunteers can teach people about cooking, as in a program run by volunteers called Quick! Help

for Meals, at farmers' markets in Los Angeles. Beyond these local, hands-on, volunteer-style solutions, are more "political" solutions: the Los Angeles City Council took a vote a few years ago that limited the numbers of fast-food chains per block in neighborhoods that have no normal grocery stores. The hope was that grocery stores would move to these impoverished neighborhoods, and indeed, some have done so. Beyond *this* is national policy action, such as one organization's agenda of pressing Congress to cut the billions of dollars of subsidies that go to agri-business companies. One NGO, the California' Public Interest Research Group explains the connection by saying that Twinkies are cheap while carrots are expensive, not because carrots are harder to make. Rather, it is that billions of dollars in the past decade have gone to subsidize agribusinesses that use the subsidies to grow crops that they convert into unhealthy food additives that are more profitable for them to sell, such as high fructose corn syrup (<http://calpirg.org/issues/cap/stop-subsidizing-obesity-0>).

Ideally, organizations can join the volunteer and activists' approaches, but this is not always possible. For some issues, volunteering is not an option. For example, people who want to help political prisoners can join Amnesty International groups to write protest letters to the governments that are holding the prisoners. Amnesty International also holds events to teach people about this distant suffering. There is not much that a person can do, hands-on, to help a person who is in solitary confinement, even if the prison is nearby, much less across the world. So local Amnesty International chapters have ways of making the experience feel real to participants. They read novels and memoirs, for example, or become semi-expert in the region on which their group focuses (Gray 2012).

More often, the volunteer approaches and the activist approaches can go hand-in-hand. Activism has to make the nutritious food or the bike riding possible, through policies that create bike lanes, and that make healthful food accessible to all people, not just wealthy ones. But it also has to work on convincing people of the spirit of the law, not just the letter: they have to *want* to exercise, and to *enjoy* healthful food. Here, as Addams would insist, there

will always be puzzles. One puzzle is that when people come into a neighborhood and tell the local people that their eating and exercise habits are all wrong, it might seem paternalistic and condescending. This is Addams' point about asking to become perplexed; democratic inquiry doesn't have an end; there is no final solution. Democracy is an experiment, but unlike experiments on chemicals, the objects of the democratic experiment (humans) are also sometimes designing the experiment, or designing experiments of their own. The experiment changes the people, who then can design new experiments based on their new selves in their new society. It's an endless spiral of change and inquiry that produces more change that produces more inquiry.

Eating, housing, transportation, clothing: for all these activities and many more, it is important not to take it for granted that an issue is naturally "political" or not. Rather, an observer who wants to understand what makes any particular civic group tick can ask him or herself, "*How* do people in a civic association connect or disconnect 'caring about people' and 'caring about politics?'"